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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 002018

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CE](#) [LTTE](#)

SUBJECT: SOLHEIM SEES NO PROGRESS TOWARDS TALKS BUT
COMMITMENT TO MAINTAINING CEASE-FIRE; CO-CHAIR MEETING
NEEDED

REF: 12/17 CAMP/ENTWISTLE/BRENNIG TELCON

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD FOR
REASON 1.5(D)

1. (C) Summary. After making the rounds in Sri Lanka, Norwegian peace envoy Solheim sees little chance of a quick return to the peace table although "things could be worse." He found both sides committed to the cease-fire and neither seeking a return to combat. In the Norwegian view, the priority in the coming months must be maintenance of the cease-fire while efforts continue to jumpstart the next round of talks. Solheim (and the Japanese and Dutch ambassadors) believe a co-chairs meeting early in the New Year would be valuable and ask that Washington propose dates and location. We also do not see signs of an imminent return to fighting, but we think Tiger intentions are largely unknowable and we do see some troublesome signs of unease in the GSL. End Summary.

2. (C) Norwegian peace envoy Eric Solheim visited Sri Lanka December 13-17, met with GSL officials including President Kumaratunga and traveled to Kilinocchi to meet with LTTE political wing chief Tamilchelvam. The Ambassador attended Solheim's meeting with donor embassies and IFI representatives December 14, the Ambassador and DCM met with Solheim on December 16 and the DCM represented the U.S. in a co-chair meeting with Solheim on December 17.

Worried Upon Arrival

3. (C) In his initial meeting with donor embassies and IFI representatives (before he had seen either the GSL or the LTTE), Solheim said that Norway "has to consider what to do" in the current situation of a negative climate between the two main parties. He wanted international community input since Norway is, at least implicitly, acting on its behalf. If the current trend continues, he said: (1) Sri Lanka will slide back into war and (2) the role of Norway (or any other third party) will become impossible. What more, he asked, can the international community do? Solheim clarified that he was not predicting an imminent return to hostilities, but that for the first time since the cease-fire was signed, there was a chance of slipping back to war. Neither party has a strategy for war, but they are following tracks in that direction. Each side is irritating the other. The LTTE is pushing the government, Prabhakaran's speech was unhelpful. The government is also sending negative signals, the most recent being a ban on government helicopter flights over LTTE-controlled territory, ostensibly on the grounds of security. This, he said, had to be seen as a negative signal to Norway, which used those flights as part of its mission. Moreover, there was a deliberate campaign by parts of the government--the JVP and the EPDP--to attack the peace process, the ceasefire and the SLMM, and Norway.

4. (C) The donors assured Solheim of continued support for Norwegian efforts and engaged in a general discussion of what the voice of the international community should be saying at present. However, there were few practical suggestions as to what the "something" might be. The Ambassador commented that peace process was hostage to internal political considerations. As a result, it was useless to appeal to Sri Lankan leaders on the basis of the national interest or the greater good. It was fine to say the international community's "voice" must be heard, but the real question was: "What would that voice say"? Several donors suggested that Norway might consider doing again what it had done in November 2003 when CBK took over three key ministries: announce that it was going home and would stay there until the parties came up with something positive.

5. (C) There was some discussion of assistance and the link in the Tokyo Declaration between assistance and progress in the peace process. The general view around the table was that interest in Sri Lanka was diminishing because of stalemate and associated

assistance was likely to also diminish. However, it was also felt that the government and the LTTE would not be swayed significantly by funding or lack thereof. Solheim proposed that the international community might wish to hold a conference around the third anniversary of the cease-fire (Feb 22) to look for a collective understanding which could lead to a strong unified position and statement.

Gap Narrow but No Confidence

16. (C) In his subsequent conversations with us and in the co-chair lunch, after his GSL and LTTE meetings, Solheim commented that the "gap is narrow" between the two sides and that it could be "easily bridged if there was confidence between them." Unfortunately, that confidence is lacking. In Solheim's view there had been an imminent return to the table in May/June but all movement since then has been backward. The other obstacle besides the lack of confidence is President Kumaratunga's political dependency on the Janatha Vimukta Peramuna (JVP). "If she were able to act on her own, talks would have started by now." Moreover, Solheim viewed as unhelpful an LTTE insistence that CBK publicly commit herself to negotiations on ISGA only. She could probably go forward on ISGA only if the LTTE would not insist that she publicly expose that intention.

Both Sides "Positive"

17. (C) Solheim said that despite the lack of progress, he had found both sides to be "positive" in their talks with him. CBK had been in a "terrific, positive mood - at her best." ("She didn't mention Ranil once!") She had expressed concern about "new" LTTE "bases" near Trinco. Solheim told the co-chairs this assertion is unproven. There are "gray areas" around Trinco in which, based on the maps the GSL and the LTTE turned over to the SLMM at the beginning of the cease-fire, it is impossible to tell who was in control when the cease-fire started. Solheim emphasized, however, that CBK made clear to him that she fully supports the cease-fire and is not looking to break it.

18. (C) Solheim commented to co-chairs that CBK is clearly trying to find her way out of the "trap" in which her dependency on the JVP keeps her from getting back to the peace table which, the Norwegian believes, she genuinely wants to do. Solheim said CBK "apologized" for the JVP anti-Norwegian campaign. Solheim said that Kadirgamar referred to ongoing "negotiations" with the JVP apparently intended to work out a way they could support a return to the peace table.

19. (C) Solheim said that, in Kilinochchi, he had found LTTE political chief Tamilchelvam "relaxed and confident." Solheim said he had two main observations from the discussion. First, Tamilchelvam made no threat about returning to war nor did he mention any sort of deadline for a return to talks, although he assured Solheim that Prabhakaran's Heroes' Day speech reference to "advancing the freedom struggle" should be taken seriously. Second, however, Tamilchelvam did not show any flexibility in terms of seeking new ways to get back to the table. Solheim said Tamilchelvam was "focused" on the JVP, stating that CBK needed to rein in the JVP or dump them and find an accommodation with the UNP. Tamilchelvam commented to Solheim that CBK's priority seems to be "self-preservation." Solheim commented that although the LTTE will not publicly "reaffirm its commitment to Oslo," it has done so repeatedly in various meetings with the Norwegians.

"Could Be Worse;" Norway Undeterred

110. (C) Asked to summarize his observations at the end of the visit, Solheim told the co-chair reps that "things could be worse." He predicted a "continued stalemate" with no imminent return to the peace table while the "political power play" in the south runs its course. Solheim emphasized that, overall, the cease-fire is not under threat from either side and neither side wants a return to war. He cautioned, however, that a cease-fire requires constant maintenance and attention from both sides and suggested that all concerned parties should make cease-fire maintenance their priority during the coming months of stasis.

111. (C) Solheim stressed that Norway, plans to stay the course, although the recent JVP anti-

Norway smear campaign and other pressures (among them a "white powder" scare at the Norwegian embassy here this week) have been unpleasant. Solheim said he and his government were extremely appreciative of the "tripartite" U.S./EU/Japan demarche to CBK on Norway's behalf earlier in the week. Solheim and/or Helgesen plan to return to Sri Lanka every 4-6 weeks to assess the situation and make the rounds. He noted that Norway will also continue to work with both the GSL and the LTTE in the ongoing effort to produce a written agenda for the next round of talks palatable to both sides. Solheim told the co-chairs that he had just received from GSL Peace Secretariat chief Jayantha Dhanapala "new language" for the agenda which he will carry to London and share with LTTE luminary Anton Balasingam (several of Solheim's colleagues around the co-chair lunch table rolled their eyes at the mention of the ongoing effort to find common GSL/LTTE language). Solheim said he was encouraged by the GSL's decision to go back to its previous policy to use its helicopters to facilitate both Norwegian travel to Kilinocchi and LTTE travel in and out of the country.

Co-Chair Meeting, International Conference

12. (C) DCM asked Solheim if Norway thought a co-chairs meeting early in the New Year would be useful. Solheim said he thought it absolutely essential. He said two key agenda items ("off the top of my head") would be: 1) given that the peace process is clearly going to take much longer than originally thought in the "optimism of Tokyo," how should co-chairs "position themselves for the long haul?;" 2) given that no real peace talks are imminent, should co-chairs call attention of broader donor community to paragraph 18 of Tokyo declaration which links aid to peace progress?

13. (C) Japanese Ambassador Suda and Dutch Ambassador Blankhart said their governments (and in Blankhart's case, the European Union) thought a co-chairs meeting imperative. They thought Solheim's agenda suggestions were valid although both (especially Suda) were uncomfortable with a "paragraph 18" discussion that was "only negative." Suda said it was important that the promise of more aid be used as a carrot rather than using an implied aid cutback as a "stick." Suda also commented that a co-chair meeting should involve "real substance" rather than just having a meeting in order to issue a statement. There was also general agreement that, depending on the co-chair meeting and events on the ground, it might be useful to have the larger "international donors conference" that Solheim had mentioned in his meeting with donors and IFIs earlier in the week later on in the first quarter of 2005, although there was no need to get into that until after the co-chairs meeting.

14. (C) Solheim suggested (with the other co-chairs nodding) that it would be best, given the transition in Washington, if the U.S. could suggest dates and location which would accommodate Deputy Secretary Armitage's schedule. DCM agreed to convey that suggestion back to Washington.

Comment

15. (C) The Norwegians have taken their licks lately but plan to keep on keeping on. Solheim clearly views this as a years-long process but one to which his government is firmly committed. Obviously in this situation where it is so difficult to get talks underway, maintenance of the ceasefire is a priority. Solheim and his Norwegian colleagues tend to take an optimistic view on this issue, always stating that "neither side wants a return to war." That is probably true, but needs some qualification. On the Tiger side, no one really knows what Prabhakaran is thinking. We remember that at the time of the Karuna breakaway, the Tigers assured the Norwegians that they would not take any dramatic action--and a few weeks later they commenced a military operation against Karuna. For its part, the GSL seems increasingly anxious. Our DATT will report separately on a "war planning" meeting held recently with service commanders and the President. We are certainly not predicting imminent war, but we do think the situation is more troublesome than the Norwegians want to admit.
LUNSTEAD